
MINUTES AND MEETING SUMMARY -- FINAL
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Montana Wild Outdoor Education Center
Helena, MT
June 9, 2014 (Meeting 17)

Advisory Council members present: Joe Perry (Chair), Joe Ball, Jay Gore, Gordon Haugen, Bill Howell, Representative Bill McChesney, Dustin Ramoie, Craig Roberts, and Dale Tribby.

FWP staff: Steve Atwood, Debbie Hohler, Brent Lonner, Ken McDonald, Rick Northrup, Mark Schlepp, Graham Taylor, Catherine Wightman.

Invited Speakers: Dan Bailey, Montana Pheasants Forever Rep

Members of the Public: Jeff Sturm, Don Ridell, Elsie Ridell, Bob Jeffrey, Nick Gevock

1. Joe called the meeting to order at 8:00 am.

- * Craig Roberts moved to accept the December 2013 meeting minutes as presented. Bill Howell seconded. All approved - motion carried.
- * Joe asked if any members wanted to rotate out of the council? Joe is rotating out, and this meeting would be his last. He has asked Dale Tribby to take over as chairman.

2. Update on 3 UGBEP Habitat Specialist positions. [Northrup]

- * The department has completed the position descriptions for the 3 positions. Bachelor degrees are a requirement, and the primary focus is on UGBEP implementation. The intent is to have the 3 positions in the current locations. The department has received the green light to advertize these positions. Rick indicated that the regions have received interest.

3. Brief introduction on today's upcoming Pheasants Forever (PF) presentation. [Bailey]

- * Dan gave a brief overview on his afternoon discussion on how PF can best serve the UGBEP. Dan has visited with FWP managers and biologists and feels "boots" are lacking on the ground. PF would like to grow the Habitat Specialist program to other key places, similar to the Billings and Denton positions.

4. Role of UGBEP Council [McDonald]

- * The initial role of the Council was to advise the department on the development of a long-term strategic plan. This was accomplished in 2011. Now the Council meets twice a year to discuss (1) the program's work plan (~April meeting) and (2) talk

about accomplishments that occurred during the field season (~October meeting) and to think about the next year's work plan.

- * Bill Howell suggested the Council set up meetings in advance.

Discussion on sage-grouse

- * Joe Perry pointed out that it's also the Council's role to serve as an informal liaison between the public and the department. FWP may not always be aware of how some members of the public feel about certain topics. Joe also feels that sage-grouse is also the Council's charge.
- * Dale questioned the outlook of sage-grouse hunting and the UGBEP – there could be ramifications.
- * Rep. McChesney added that the composition of sage-grouse management oversight team and where the funding will come from has been a challenge. EQC has spent a lot of time talking about state involvement on federal lands. He has been in touch with a number of groups and there is general support across the board for investment in sage-grouse conservation.
- * Joe Perry stated that the Council needs to pay attention to EQC and the License Committee. ***Next EQC meeting is July 9-10.***

5. Update on Governor's sage-grouse plan. [Wightman]

- * The Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Advisory Council's package has been submitted to the Governor's office. Tim Baker, the Governor's Natural Resources Policy Advisor, currently has the package. To date, there has been no release from the Governor's office.
- * Jay mentioned the 2005 sage-grouse plan, which divided the state into 3 eco-regions. He asked if the FWP Commission considered this concept; unable to find anything in the Commission minutes. Eco-regions were approved in 3 zones: NE, SE, and SW Montana. ***Commission minutes appended to UGBEP Council minutes.***

6. Overview of Regions 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 habitat work. [Hohler]

- * Region 1: Continued maintenance of food/cover plots and maintenance on Ninepipe WMA. Region is nearly done with Ninepipe WMA management plan.
- * Region 2: Sharp-tailed grouse restoration – discussions are ongoing, and there may be suitable habitat in western MT. There is a need for ground-based habitat suitability analysis.
- * Region 3: Canyon Ferry WMA—continued maintenance efforts including DNC reseeding, irrigation of existing DNC and shelterbelts. PF Chapters in Helena and Bozeman have assisted in these efforts. FWP plans to create 2 small ponds and establish a brood strip at Meyer's. Poindexter Slough FAS—maintenance efforts are ongoing, to include: (1) replacing 125 shrubs and adding additional juniper

shrubs. Watering takes place 2x a week. 7 acres of food plots were recently planted and bare spots in nesting cover were reseeded. Annual spot spraying of henbane and houndstongue has occurred.

- * Region 5: Habitat Forever/FWP/BLM work plans—maintain riparian areas, ongoing conversion of agricultural fields to DNC (50 acres per year). This year, FWP/HF plan to install crowing lanes, irrigated brood strips, and escape cover to increase brood production and survival. Food plot acreage will be reduced 20% while increasing the number of food plots in the future. Monitoring of habitat effectiveness is ongoing (i.e. crow count surveys, brood surveys, wing collections, and hunter use data). Additional work to seed 4 different DNC mixes and special pollinator mix. Will be establishing 5 brood plots on Pompeys Pillar and Yellowstone WMA. USFS/FWP Aspen Generation Work- treatments are likely this fall. Treatment units will be determined in the future.
- * Region 6: 2 CRP seed cost-share projects will be underway this year. One shelterbelt recently planted by PF chapter near Flaxville (5-ac, 2,500 shrubs). Food plots are dropping off as landowners are farming more of them. A few are in the works, however. A lot more CRP is coming off this year—noticeable around Froid/McCabe area.
- * Joe Perry asked the going rate for a food plot (\$200/acre, with UGBEP reimbursing \$150). Joe stated that his fixed costs are approximately \$250/acre. If the department paid the fixed costs, there would likely be more interest.
- * Joe expressed appreciation over the UGB habitat work done by regional staff.

7. Overview of Freezout WMA (R4) [Lonner]

- * Provided an overview of past and current management of Freezout WMA. Planned efforts on food plots using seed mixes obtained from Pheasants Forever. PF chapters have been involved with many of these habitat projects.

8. Overview of Habitat Forever/PF/FWP work in R4, Denton (R4) [Roberts]

- * Craig provided an overview of projects completed this spring and anticipated for next year. Maintenance activities continue on Beckman WMA, Wolf Creek, and Coffee Creek. Regarding silver sagebrush work, Tom Shivers strongly encouraged use of this plant. The plants are now 4-5 feet tall since they were planted in 2001. Currently, the sagebrush is planted in a double row with fabric. Appears that fabric helped improve growth but Craig is uncertain about the longevity of the plants.
- * In one area, 1 entire row of silver buffaloberry was lost. After removing fabric, silver sagebrush seedlings are showing up, apparently coming up from parent plants. Area is adjacent to a food plot and receives heavy use by birds: loafing during the day and feeding at night in the adjacent food plot.

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- * Silverscape (Russian olive X Silverberry): Planted 15 shrubs on the Beckman, and plants are growing fast. After the 3rd season, the shrubs are 3-4 feet tall and very spread out. The fruit is an olive, but it has not been shown if the olive is fertile or not.
 - * Seaberry—produces a lot of berries; grew approximately 4-5 feet in 4th year.
 - * Craig has found that with clean cultivation, shrubs have twice the growth. On areas with fabric, Craig will go back and spray the grass growing along the edges. This helps to reduce the competition for water.

9. Overview of Region 7 habitat work. [Atwood]

- * Steve pointed out that he has a 10+ year working relationship with landowners and the UGBEP continues to be an important tool for habitat conservation. He reviewed some of the projects he is working for the upcoming year: CRP seed cost-share and food/cover plots.
- * Gordon asked about the Tongue River property where a fence was installed on riparian area and DNRC was reimbursed for lost revenue.

10. Update on National Fish and Wildlife Federation (NFWF) Grant [Wightman]

- * A 2-page pre-proposal was submitted early in June seeking \$250,000 to conserve wetland and upland habitats. Grant would be matched 1:1 by UGBEP (~\$200,000) and Migratory Bird Program (~\$50,000). Program would be implemented in priority areas: HiLine and eastern Montana targeting (1) sagebrush-grassland or (2) wetland-grassland complexes to prevent conversion to agricultural lands. Program would be similar to FWP/LIP sagebrush lease agreements. Program may likely enroll 40,000 to 50,000 acres. FWP is thinking a payment of \$15/acre for 30 years. The program focus is on native habitats with criteria that will be developed for ranking. Mike asked if the program is paying for native habitats that would likely not be converted. Catherine stated that the eligibility map focuses on areas at high risk of conversion.
- * Council expressed concern on the potential of over-grazing on lands enrolled in NFWF projects.

11. Update on VPA-HIP Grant [Hohler]

- * A grant proposal will be submitted this week seeking \$150,000 for each of 3 years (\$450,000 total) that will be matched 1:1 by UGBEP funds. Grant dollars will target CRP and Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) contracts in the priority areas. Program goals are to enroll an additional 150 private landowners and 24,000-48,000 acres of CRP and other productive game bird habitats. New to this grant application is (1) to allow the consideration of private lands located in lands outside the priority areas, and (2) allow enrollment

of up to 25% of the contracts currently enrolled in other USDA programs such as EQIP, WRP, and CSP.

- * Gordon pointed out that producers can pull out of CRP without penalty. ***The FSA news release is appended at the end of the minutes.***
- * Discussion on using Open Fields on state lands. It is difficult to justify a \$5/acre payment on lands open to public hunting. Joe suggested half the payment towards CRP on State Lands. Unclear how that payment would be divided between the lessee and DNRC.

12. Council's response to NFWF and VPA-HIP grant applications.

- * Council supports UGBEP match of \$450,000 for 3 years for the VPA-HIP grant and \$200,000 match for the NFWF grant. Bill H. moved and Gordon seconded. Motion carried.
- * Council advised the department to consider a 50% payment (e.g., \$2.50/acre) on state lands that conserve CRP. Jay moved, Dustin seconded. Motion carried.

13. State-wide work plan.

- * Debbie provided an overview of the program work plan. She and Rick go over the work plan at least twice a year. Duties of the work plan include:
 - Ongoing program administration—includes working with regional staff to process contracts, database entry, receive calls about the program, web site updates, and administrative support to the UGBEP council. This year, a survey was sent out to cooperators reminding them about program enrollment and to provide (1) an opportunity to update contact information and (2) determine if they had interest in other program opportunities. Nearly half the cooperators (N=92) have responded; a follow-up letter will be issued.
 - Reporting—biennial legislative reporting, establishing pheasant prices, generating contracts, and implementing sagebrush lease monitoring (July 2014), preparation of access guides.
 - Partnerships—continue to work with Habitat Forever, Pheasants Forever, and the National Wild Turkey Federation, oversees grant administration for Habitat Forever.
 - Update Program where needed—draft policy manual completed and undergoing review.
 - Marketing strategy: Comm-Ed finalizing a campaign post-card to target landowners in priority areas.
 - Stay up-to-date on current upland game bird conservation, including the USDA Farm Bill and other opportunities.
- * Looking to FY15, the work plan may address program marketing, field visits, and updating project maps and access guides.

14. Program updates. [Hohler]

- * Draft manual being reviewed by Rick, will be out to regions for their review next month.
- * Access Guides: The Open Fields Hunting Atlas will accompany the UGBEP Projects Access Guide. A draft publication was reviewed by the Council.
- * A program postcard has been drafted by FWP Comm-Ed. The draft product was handed out to Council. A final version will be provided to the Council soon.

15. Council had 3 specific questions for the department:

a) Proposed shelterbelt project (R7):

- * Dale asked about a proposed shelterbelt in Prairie County. Area was worked up to seed alfalfa then switched to a food plot to control weeds before a shelterbelt was proposed. Region and Helena had ongoing discussions about the size and cost of the projects areas. Proposed project was initially \$30,000, which included fencing costs. Helena recommended that the shelterbelt configuration be changed to more of a square design in order to reduce costs. Hit a time of year when planting needed to occur, causing a delay in shelterbelt; instead, a 5-acre food plot was planted. Dale stated that the cooperator is a long-standing BMA cooperator that borders public lands, he would be surprised if access was compromised. Joe said the council is “shelterbelt-friendly” and should consider longer-term contracts. It is also likely that staff will have a good feel for landowner commitment.

b) Open Fields, why was enrollment not available in 2014?

- * Rick responded that the primary reason was because the department was applying for a VPA-HIP grant, and there may have been competing issues with successfully obtaining the grant. Secondly, because of staffing concerns, the department felt it would be more efficient to have an Open Fields enrollment period when the UGBEP habitat specialists are on the ground. We are also awaiting the finalization of an MOU between FSA and FWP where CRP and producer contact information is shared with department staff so that landowners in priority areas may be targeted. Debbie added that to date, the MOU is in final draft form and awaiting FSA’s signature.
- * Council stated that Open Fields is a high priority item.
- * Gordon Haugen commented that the department should implement Open Fields using a variety of FWP positions, not just UGBEP positions. For example, Block Management staff could also help with program implementation.

c) Management Leases—what has been proposed?

- * The management lease option is described in the draft UGBEP policy manual. The purpose of this program is to preserve and maintain high quality upland game bird habitats and to provide hunting access. As proposed, the contract

length would be a minimum of 3 years up to 30 years. Payments would be according to habitat types: riparian/wetland (\$10 per acre per year) or upland (\$8 per acre per year), with a minimum acreage of 80 acres to 160 acres for the basis of payment. Walk-in hunting with no further permission to hunt upland game birds will be required. For example, a 15-acre cattail slough must allow for at least 80 acres of contiguous, adjoining habitats. The payment would be \$10/acre X 80 acres per contract year.

- * Management lease program tailored after ND working lands program, which pays a lease option for 3 years. According to statute, the program is able to pay for management leases and this is likely an untapped opportunity.
- * Program may complement the Block Management Program, but more details need to be fleshed out.
- * General support for the new program, but Council would like to see next iteration. Department may move to a pilot program.

16. Legislative updates and budget issue. [McDonald]

- * There is a potential for a license bill, but if it doesn't go forward, FWP would look at cuts or earmarks for making up the difference. FWP has vacancy savings that underfund personal services by 4% (or, 96% to fund fully staffed agency). There was discussion about not seeing these cuts as dollars but in positions. The question to be asked, can the legislature direct the governor how to run agencies or only on funding allocations.
- * Sen. Brenden has a bill request to prohibit hunting of sage-grouse.
- * Dale asked if there will be greater scrutiny on UGBEP projects—given the chance of allocating funds to keep agency going? Ken responded that FWP is looking for more on the ground delivery of projects. The scrutiny is comes from the strategic plan.

17. Pheasant Forever opportunities and updates. [Bailey]

- * Dan stated that \$225,000, to be applied over 5 years, have been verbally committed by PF chapters to leverage funds from the UGBEP (proposed by PF at \$750,000) to support an UGB specialist on public lands. Eight chapters are on board.
- * Two habitat specialist positions in Lewistown and Billings cost about \$350,000 and \$400,000 for 5 years, respectively. Is there opportunity to expand?
- * Discussion on Ninepipe WMA. Currently, FWP is relying on lessees, and that is a good model for now because it works well.
- * Joe asked if FWP has the capacity for oversight on these proposed positions. In a realm of possibilities, oversight would be challenging. Currently Jay Watson provides some oversight and Sonja has a lot on her plate. If Craig wasn't

involved, it would be difficult. Craig said the Habitat Forever model works but supervision is needed.

- * Discussion on the proposed position ensued. The position cannot be a Habitat Forever employee as they cannot use State equipment. In order to use State's equipment, the position could potential be an FWP modified FTE. For further consideration, equipment is a huge expense.
- * Work on private versus public lands was discussed. Chapters fully support their dollars to enhance public lands. Mike Jensen provided feedback on private lands: usually, landowners can't or don't have the time to do enhancement work. It would be beneficial to do habitat work on private lands. Mike would like to see a pilot project started on private lands because the best bird hunting opportunities are found on private lands. Graham added that there are 5 conservation easements in the Great Falls area that are relatively near one another (~50 mile radius), and those landowners would be interested in getting enhancement work done.
- * Craig recommends that a clearer sense of costs, equipment needs, and chapter contributions need to be brought to the Council next time. Craig supports the concept, but more details need to be fleshed out, including details on where position would be located, given that WMAs are scattered about. Rick said that it is difficult to justify a hire for 1 WMA.
- * Joe suggested that Dan return to the chapters to consider flexibility for private lands work. Joe recommended that this model be placed on a higher priority and that Dan and Rick should revisit needs and opportunities again.

18. Public Comment.

- * Nick Gevock, the Conservation Director for Montana Wildlife Federation and a PF member from Headwater Chapters, is concerned about the large balance and working through processes to get the money spent. He expressed concern that money could be taken away from the program.

19. Council discussion on sage-grouse season.

- * Jay Gore, also a member of Big Sky Upland Bird Association, concerned about the way things were handled with the season setting process and the basis of decision to close the season. He was concerned that process was not followed.
- * The plan identifies 45% below long term average, and department used 2 of 3 years of data. Jay was surprised that information was relayed to the Commission before a full analysis was conducted. Rick pointed out that data and analysis offered to Commission was marked as "tentative."
- * There is also concern that once season is closed, it will be difficult to reopen.
- * Dale stated that there is a tie to expenditures of UGBEP dollars and governor's expectation to expend dollars on sage-grouse. Jay said that the plan had mentioned UGBEP dollars, but that link was removed in final draft. Joe added

that testimony he offered at EQC and the commission was that if sage-grouse are listed, the hunters' responsibility "goes out the window." Rep. McChesney said that likely the last thing the governor would want to do is raise the flag on a particular earmarked fund. Additionally, there isn't enough money in the program to carry the plan.

- * Joe asked Rep. McChesney and Dale to draft a letter, and Joe will sign it. Letter will touch upon UGBEP funds and the Governor's sage-grouse plan. ***Letter is appended to the minutes.***
- * Joe stated that the department followed process.

20. Next meeting: Billings, October 6-7, 2014. Travel day is October 5. Future meetings will be held:

- * April 13-14, 2015 for UGBEP - Helena
- * October 5th, 2015 for UGBEP Council – recommend Lewistown

21. Joe adjourned the meeting 3:45 pm.